

## THE MOLDERS' UNION AND THE ALLIED METAL TRADES

The building trades have always been thrown into close contact with one another. The very fact that carpenters, painters, plasterers, etc., work side by side on the same jobs has had much to do in fostering a feeling of fellowship and co-operation among union men of all sorts in the building industry. In the metal industry, the different trades have not been brought into the same intimate contact. Fifty or more years ago it was uncommon to find plants which employed more than two or three of these trades. Today, however, some establishments are so extensive that they find place for practically every metal trade. The different crafts remain somewhat isolated from each other, nevertheless, so that the sense of group solidarity has never fully developed among the men of the rank and file.

Labor organizations within the building trades have been able to secure effective co-operation because there have been about a half-dozen unions of fairly equal effectiveness which have been able to give each other real assistance as well as to ask for it. In the metal trades, union leadership has depended largely upon the Molders, the one union which has possessed size, influence, and responsibility far beyond the accomplishments of allied trades. It is important, therefore, to see what attitude this union has taken toward sympathetic or joint action in the group of crafts to which it belongs.

As early as 1864 the Molders considered the feasibility of co-operating with the Machinists in forming "subordinate Trade Assemblies where separate trade union activities are impracticable."<sup>1</sup> Nothing was done, however, to carry out the plan. The incident is noteworthy only as showing the cordial relations which existed between the two crafts at that time. Again, in 1865 there appeared to be considerable team work between the molders and the stove

<sup>1</sup> Stockton, "The Molders and the General Labor Movement," *International Molders' Journal*, March, 1916, p. 220.

mounters of Troy. An agreement was made between the parties whereby, when one was on strike, the other was to supply information as to what occurred within the struck shop, to hinder "scabs" from going to work, and, in case the latter did obtain entry, to do everything possible to make them undesirable employees. Later on mounters and "pattern filers" were admitted to a meeting of the Molders' Union when a certain strike was being discussed. Apparently the mounters offered some active assistance in the difficulty, since the Molders shortly afterward voted to sustain their allies when the strike was settled and to walk out of any shop wherein a mounter was refused work on account of having helped in the contest indicated.<sup>1</sup>

At various times down to 1890 molders struck in sympathy with mounters, pattern makers, boiler makers, and machinists. The number of grievances supported was not large and none of the trades assisted asked for the universal application of a sympathetic strike policy. In several cases union molders hastily decided to pursue sympathetic action without waiting to obtain the international sanction that their rules required. Molders also took an interest in the formation of national unions among stove mounters and pattern makers.

After 1890 the weaker metal trades began to appeal with some frequency for the help of the Molders during labor difficulties. As soon as this movement became manifest the executive board of the Molders' Union insisted that the local unions proceed with caution before lending strike support to the appellants. The board refused to sanction sympathetic strikes at Pittsburgh in favor of the Machinists and at New York in behalf of the Housesmiths in 1890 and 1891 respectively.<sup>2</sup> While certain molders contended that their union should observe the old motto of the Knights of Labor, "An injury to one is the concern of all," yet the board expressed strong disapproval of inconsiderate sympathetic strikes and "warned locals that before entering upon a strike of this sort they must con-

<sup>1</sup> MS Minutes, Local Union No. 2, Troy, September 12 and 21, 1865; March 16 and 19, 1866.

<sup>2</sup> *Proceedings*, 1895, p. 30. In 1896, however, the Columbia Lodge, No. 261, of the Machinists refused to handle "scab-made" castings.

sult the best interests of their own trade and obtain the sanction of their recognized international officers."<sup>1</sup> The board's notification at once had considerable effect in restraining local unions from rashly taking up the cudgels in immediate defense of threatened sister-societies.

Editorial comment in the *Iron Molders' Journal* further elucidated the official position of the International Union regarding sympathetic strikes. It was said that the Molders had lost many shops by such strikes, but that they had never gained any benefit therefrom. Since the Molders had "the most powerful and best organization" in the iron industry, it was "not surprising that their kindred trades should court their assistance and try to win their fight by the prestige of their more powerful ally." The editor approved the "bond of sympathy" idea, but asserted that "before being called upon to engage in a fight not of our own making we should certainly have the privilege of passing upon the demands and considering how our active co-operation will affect our own interest and integrity without incurring the obloquy and abuse of fellow-unionists."<sup>2</sup>

In 1894 the Federated Metal Trades was organized by the Machinists, the Boiler Makers, the Metal Polishers, the Blacksmiths, the Pattern Makers, and the Molders, under the auspices of the American Federation of Labor. The by-laws of the organization placed "a salutary restriction upon the tendency of a local body to rush into an ill-advised conflict," by requiring that no sympathetic strikes be called without careful investigation by representatives of the various trades.<sup>3</sup> After 1896 the organization was discontinued. During its brief career it accomplished little of note. The Molders apparently were but slightly concerned about its existence.

Following the dissolution of the Federated Metal Trades the policy of the Molders, so far as sympathetic action was concerned, became somewhat more conservative. In April, 1897, the executive board issued a statement of which all local unions were enjoined

<sup>1</sup> *Iron Molders' Journal*, July, 1896, p. 277.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, August, 1896, p. 326.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, January, 1897, p. 15.

to take strict account. The board declared that while it would always be the Union's endeavor to render all possible service and assistance to sister-bodies, yet if aid were to be granted, it was to be only on condition that before an allied trade undertook to strike it should lay the whole grievance before the Molders for their investigation. When a request for joint action was made to a local union or conference board by some other trade, the matter was to be submitted at once to the president and executive board in the same way as any other dispute entirely within the ranks of the Union. After due consideration the president and board would then decide whether or not the local union or unions would be justified in participating in a strike with the petitioning trade if the dispute could not be settled in any other way. In brief, it might be said that sympathetic strikes were to follow the same course as other strikes, with the addition of advance notice from the trade whose grievance was the primary thing at stake.

The purpose of the advance-notice requirement was a very obvious one. It secured the Molders against having an allied trade rush into a strike and then make an appeal to the "natural weakness" of fellow-unionists to assist it when the fortunes of war began to run adversely. In the name of brotherhood many a union has been inveigled into aiding another, even though the cause may have been none too just, merely because it seemed wrong to stand by and see capital win. By having a cast-iron rule necessitating investigation before the difficulty got beyond bounds, the Molders were able thereafter to judge each case on its own merits without undue sentiment or excitement.

The position taken by the executive board was affirmed by the convention of 1899, and the same rules still hold. The same convention also turned a leaden ear to a plea from the Pattern Makers for a plan whereby the Molders were to refuse to handle "scab" patterns in return for the patronage of their label by the Pattern Makers. Opposition to the scheme was based partly upon the argument that it might result in the violation of trade agreements and partly upon distaste for having the Molders made "the pivot for the action of the other iron trades."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Proceedings*, 1899, pp. 89, 178, 191.

Scarcely had the 1899 convention adjourned when the Central Federated Union of New York City suspended a local molders' union from its membership for refusal to order its men out of several shops where pattern makers were on strike.<sup>1</sup> The attitude of the New York body probably indicated the general feeling of the more radical unionists everywhere toward the Molders' apparent conservatism. Encouraged by this same episode, perhaps, the Pattern Makers then approached the next session of the American Federation of Labor with a resolution requesting the Molders to order their Boston locals not to handle "scab" patterns in that vicinity. The Federation, however, refused to trespass upon the autonomy of an affiliated order.<sup>2</sup>

In several instances during 1900 the pressure upon local molders' unions became so severe that they went out on unsanctioned sympathetic strikes rather than endure reproach for being the associates of "scab" pattern makers and mounters. In all cases the men were ordered back to work at once, but in some places they were so rebellious that the international office could only enforce its orders by threatening to remove the charters of the recalcitrant locals.<sup>3</sup>

In 1900 the Machinists began a desperate struggle with the National Metal Trades Association. The nominal issue was that of a shorter workday, but at the bottom the whole effectiveness of the Machinists' Union was at stake. The severity of this conflict, together with the rapid development of comprehensive employers' associations in all departments of industry, set the metal trades' unionists once more to thinking about the possibilities of a federation as a means of defense. Accordingly the trades<sup>4</sup> quickly formed a temporary organization, and finally in 1903 a constitution and by-laws were adopted for what was called the Metal Trades Federation.

<sup>1</sup> *Iron Molders' Journal*, September, 1899, p. 461; October, p. 528.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, January, 1900, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> In 1898 three molders' unions in Chicago belonged to the Building Material Council. The molders in New York City belonged to the Building Trades Council until 1900, when shop trades were excluded. In several other places, as Rochester, New York, molders' locals had membership in metal trades' councils by 1900.

<sup>4</sup> The organizing trades were the Machinists, the Pattern Makers, the Metal Polishers, the Blacksmiths, the Boiler Makers, the Allied Metal Mechanics, the Core Makers, the Electrical Workers, and the Molders.

During its formative period the Molders lent their influence to the proposed alliance, but with considerable caution, since they fancied that the movement would prove a "source of weakness" unless properly guided.<sup>1</sup> At meetings held in 1901, representatives of the Union were present, but they did not pronounce in favor of federation as their membership had not expressed itself upon the issue. In his report to the 1902 convention President Fox urged that the question of affiliating with the undertaking be handled with care since, from all indications, the contemplated federation was not likely to be "prolific of practical results" on account of several weak and inexperienced unions destined to be connected with it.<sup>2</sup> The convention accordingly voted to leave the problem in the hands of the incoming officers. The latter subsequently decided to keep the Union free from the federated movement.

Reasons for the Molders' desire to remain independent of the Federation can be found in the rules of that body. Affiliated unions were required to call sympathetic strikes in favor of allied organizations. Before such a strike could occur a statement had to be issued by the union wishing support to all other unions in the local council. If the council failed to reach an agreement with the firm or firms affected, the case was then referred to the various international headquarters where strike votes were to be taken by the different executive boards. If a two-thirds vote of the general unions, acting through their boards, finally resulted in favor of supporting the grievance, and if further efforts to settle the trouble proved fruitless, a general strike, led by the president of the local council, was to be declared. To the executive committee of the Federation was granted the power to declare the strike off, so far as the Federation was concerned.<sup>3</sup> It will thus be seen that the Federation practically took strike control out of the hands of the individual unions. It was to this feature that the Molders found objection. The Union resolutely determined to be its own master where strikes were concerned. It welcomed understandings with

<sup>1</sup> *Iron Molders' Journal*, January, 1901, pp. 23, 24.

<sup>2</sup> *Proceedings*, 1902, p. 618.

<sup>3</sup> Kirk, *National Labor Federations in the United States*, pp. 111, 112. In the "Johns Hopkins University Studies," Series 24, Nos. 9-10.

closely connected unions possessing "equal responsibility and equal ability," but refused to be whisked about by every "sympathetic impulse."<sup>1</sup>

During the Federation's existence it should not be assumed that the Molders stood completely aloof from other metal trades. In several instances their locals were allowed to undertake joint strikes for shorter hours and more wages with unions of the Machinists. In other cases permission was given to locals to strike purely in sympathy with allied trades. In San Francisco, Milwaukee, and other centers local unions entered the newly organized metal-trades councils without subscribing, however, to the policies of the Federation. It is noteworthy that these unions, particularly, urged the general body to join the Federation.

The Federation, like its predecessor, lived only a year or two, and produced many disappointments for its supporters. The movement for some form of alliance, however, would not down. Accordingly a meeting was held at Cincinnati in 1906, attended by representatives of the Machinists, the Blacksmiths, the Pattern Makers, the Metal Polishers, the Boiler Makers, and the Molders. Steeped in the lessons of the past, the wiser heads at once opposed the idea of an offensive and defensive alliance. Now, even more than in previous years, "the stronger unions looked dubiously upon a proposition which invited entanglements on behalf of a weaker ally; the high-dues union looked askance at the low-dues ally."<sup>2</sup> The conference, therefore, came to the conclusion that wisdom dictated the formation of a Federated Metal Trades whose sole function should be that of organizing. Each affiliated union was scheduled to furnish a special organizer to be under the control of the Federation. Before going into effect the scheme was to be voted upon by the different unions.

When the new plan came before the Molders' convention of 1907 nothing more definite was done than to indorse a "practical form of federation" as a means of combating the hostile associations of metal-trades employers. But while the Union did not see

<sup>1</sup> *Iron Molders' Journal*, June, 1901, p. 341. Other unions which remained independent were the Pattern Makers and the Boiler Makers.

<sup>2</sup> "President's Report," *Proceedings*, 1907, p. 18.

fit to sanction the work of the 1906 conference, it authorized the president and two other members, named by the convention, to call another conference of the allied trades, provided the idea was approved by a referendum.<sup>1</sup> The general vote, when taken, resulted favorably to the project.

As the result of the call which the Molders' committee sent out, a convention was held which induced the American Federation of Labor to create a Metal Trades Department at its 1907 session. The purposes of this body were to promote local metal-trades councils, to adjust trade and jurisdictional disputes, and to assist in the organization of the various affiliated unions. Its rules provided that if a strike were inaugurated by one trade, other trades within the same local council should not join in the struggle without the consent of their respective international unions. Membership in the department was made compulsory for all metal-trades unions belonging to the American Federation. Consequently the Molders affiliated and their executive board urged all local unions to join the councils in their districts. In 1911 the board also instructed the international officers to further the policy of making agreements with large corporations through the department wherever practicable.<sup>2</sup> The 1912 convention also recommended that an effort be made to have agreements with employers terminate at the same time as other agreements between the same employers and other organizations. At the same meeting persistent efforts to promote the amalgamation of the Molders with other metal trades led to the adoption of compromise resolutions indorsing working agreements with the Pattern Makers and proposing that the Metal Trades Department use its influence to establish conference boards and working agreements between the Molders, the Stove Mounters, and the Metal Polishers. Another measure which was passed provided that if the skilled melters and furnace men in brass foundries were willing to join in strikes with molders, the executive board should give consideration to their financial support.

The relations between the Molders and the department were entirely harmonious until 1913, when the latter adopted new regu-

<sup>1</sup> *Proceedings*, 1907, p. 201.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 1912, p. 70.

lations relative to sympathetic strikes. Certain affiliated unions complained that the voluntary character of the strike provisions had prevented the progress which was expected when the department was created. "They held that it was necessary to give the department power to order a strike vote of all trades when a certain majority so desired, and that if a certain majority of all the union workmen employed favored a general movement, the minority should be forced to act with the majority, or be expelled from the department."<sup>1</sup> Some of those who took this position belonged to unions whose financial systems were none too sound.

Stated very briefly, the new rule of the department provided that general strikes by the metal trades could be called if approved by a two-thirds vote of the allied unions in any local council. Any organization which refused to obey the strike order issued by the president and executive council of the department was to be suspended. No union affiliated was to sign agreements governing shops where other affiliated unions were interested except upon approval of the department's executive board.

The Molders' entire delegation at the convention where this rule was adopted was in strong opposition to its enactment. They held that the department thereby became superior in authority to the component unions, its creators, and that the autonomy of the latter was thereby destroyed. President Valentine declined to stand for re-election as one of the vice-presidents of the organization and also tendered his resignation for his unexpired term to take effect immediately, since he could not give even passive approval to a regulation which, in his opinion, was a direct infringement of the constitution of his order. At the next meeting of the executive board of the Molders statements were issued, both to the department and to the American Federation, challenging the department's right to set aside the strike laws of any member union and asserting the intention of the board to prohibit the taking of any strike vote within its own membership and to refuse sanction except in accord with the rules of the Union.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *International Molders' Journal*, December, 1913, p. 1034.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, March, 1914, pp. 223-26.

When the matter was brought to the attention of the executive council of the American Federation of Labor, that body proved to be of the unanimous opinion that the department's scheme was a violation of the constitution of the Federation which guaranteed autonomy to the affiliated unions. At the 1914 convention of the Federation the difficulty was adequately settled. Membership in all the various departments of that body was made purely voluntary. Moreover, no department was to "enact any law or adopt any policy which aims to force a minority of the affiliated organizations to do something to which they are opposed, or which is contrary to their methods of procedure as provided by their respective constitutions."<sup>1</sup> Recent relations between the Molders and the Metal Trades Department have been amicable. Local unions have joined metal-trades councils and in some places sympathetic strikes have been entered into.

The question may now be asked, Why have the Molders always been so conservative about undertaking joint strike action with allied unions? There are those who do not hesitate to say that the Union has been a highly selfish organization. The Molders' line of defense has probably been indicated in part, at least, during the course of this article. Yet it seems wise to sum up their position in compact form.

It should be clearly understood that the Molders have never had objections to the principle of sympathetic strikes. Nor have they ever entered into agreements preventing such strikes. But they have always insisted that they should be governed by their own regulations rather than be subject to the whims of some other organization. The Molders are the second oldest existing union formed in the metal trades. After years of hard effort they have succeeded in building up an order wherein discipline and business-like methods prevail to a notable degree. A splendid financial system has been developed. National and local trade agreements have been negotiated and observed with a determination to make the organization respected for its responsibility. On the other hand, some of the other metal trades are of recent origin, have insufficient discipline, possess poor financial resources or

<sup>1</sup> *International Molders' Journal*, December, 1914, pp. 988-90.

beneficial systems,<sup>1</sup> think little of business methods, or are numerically weak. If the Molders were compelled to go out sympathetically every time one of these allied trades called a strike, they would soon waste their strength in the cause of others. In return the weaker unions could offer the Molders but small assistance. Thus, the advantages would be practically one-sided. Since the Union has always felt that its first duty was to its own members, it has sturdily decided to fight molders' battles effectively rather than to fritter away its resources as everybody's champion. In this respect, then, as in others, the Molders are a business-like concern.

From the foregoing account it is evident that offensive and defensive alliances between the metal-trades unions are "all right in theory but do not work in practice." It certainly seems essential from the standpoint of highest efficiency that closely related labor organizations of all kinds should co-operate in collective bargaining. The difficulties in the way of joint action, however, have been practically insurmountable in the metal industries so far as the general situation has been concerned.

What the future holds by way of sympathetic policies in the metal trades is difficult to forecast. The writer would venture the opinion, however, that before joint action meets with general acceptance the weaker trades must become more thoroughly organized and must bolster up their financial systems. The Molders and the one or two other unions which now possess some strength will never sacrifice everything in sympathetic or joint strikes while they receive practically nothing therefrom. Until greater uniformity in power, responsibility, and prestige is attained by the weaker unions through their own efforts in their own jurisdictions, the present Metal Trades Department will continue to be little more than a joint organizing agency.

One interesting possibility for the future is found in a favorable outcome of the present amalgamation movement. In 1903 the Molders absorbed the Core Makers' Union, thus settling irritating questions of jurisdiction and sympathetic action. Since that time

<sup>1</sup> On two occasions, when joint action of all the metal trades took place, it was discovered shortly after the strike occurred that a majority of the unions involved were unable to pay strike benefits to their members (*International Molders' Journal*, December, 1913, p. 1034).

an active minority within the union has campaigned for consolidation with still other allied organizations. The majority, however, has steadfastly opposed this policy. Yet it may prove advisable within even the next few years for the Molders to amalgamate with such closely connected bodies as the Pattern Makers or the Stove Mounters, though the likelihood of such a movement still seems remote. In all probability if amalgamation meets with favor in the metal trades the weaker unions will be the first to consolidate. A strong union, like the Molders, will remain fairly content with its independent position so long as it can wield anything like its present power.

Amalgamation might be considered a cure for the existing difficulties pertaining to joint or sympathetic action by the metal trades. It must be remembered, nevertheless, that amalgamation without better organization, finance, and discipline would mean but little improvement in the condition of the majority of these trades.

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